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Factsheet

# ORGANIC FARMING IN ONTARIO

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## Defining "Organic"

Organic farming is a method of crop and livestock production that involves a lot more than eliminating pesticides, fertilizers, antibiotics and growth hormones (except those that are allowed by the Production Standards of certification agencies).

Organic farming is a system of farm design and management practices, based on sound ecological principles, that seeks to create ecosystems with a diverse mix of mutually dependent life forms. Organic farming promotes the use of crop rotations and cover crops, and encourages balanced host/predator relationships. Organic residues and nutrients are recycled. Cover crops and composted manures are used to maintain soil humus. Preventative insect and disease control methods are practised including the use of improved genetics and resistant varieties. Integrated weed management and soil conservation systems are also valuable tools on an organic farm. When necessary, some "natural" or non-synthetic pesticides may be allowed. These products must be registered for use in the specific crop-pest situation by federal and provincial regulations and allowable for use within the organic crop production standards. All grains, forages and protein supplements fed to livestock must be organically grown.

Organic food production prohibits the use of highly soluble or synthetically compounded mineral fertilizers, synthetically compounded pesticides, growth regulators, antibiotics, hormones, colouring or other artificial additives, ionizing radiation, and recombinant genetic manipulation of plants or animals. Prohibited products and practices must not be used on certified organic farms for at least three years prior to production of the certified organic products.

A more encompassing definition has been developed and accepted by the organic food industry, and future federal legislation and standards are expected to complement this definition. For more information contact, Canadian Organic Unity Project, 1019 McMillan Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3M 0T5. In addition, each certification agency issues a set of Organic Production Standards and should be contacted for more information.

Many organic farmers believe that a successful organic system begins with the soil – a healthy soil produces healthy plants and in turn healthy livestock and people. They regard soil as a living organism of inter-dependent processes and life forms.

Organic farming may not be for everyone. Certainly some crops are more challenging than others to grow organically. There are, however, many successful organic farmers in Ontario. They are in almost every county and nearly every commodity is being produced.

**Figure 1.** A wide range of Organic food products is available.

## "Sustainable" Agriculture

"A sustainable agriculture is one that over the long term: Enhances environmental quality and the resource base on which agriculture depends; Provides basic human food and fibre requirements; Is economically viable; and, Enhances the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole." – (American Society of Agronomy)

Organic farming is one type of sustainable agriculture, but sustainable agriculture also includes many methods of farming that use low rates of farm chemicals, not allowed by organic

92-06569/

standards, when necessary. Examples are IPM programs that reduce pesticide use and weed control programs that use banded herbicide and inter-row cultivation.

A basic philosophy of sustainable agriculture is to use chemical methods as a secondary method rather than a first approach to pest control and fertility management.

**Why Organic?**

According to a 1986 survey by Agriculture Canada, two of the main reasons farmers choose organic production methods is for "the health of their family" and because "it is better for the soil." Farmers are concerned about the environment and issues such as well water contamination, river and lake pollution, and soil degradation. Manufacturing, transportation and pollution are threats, be they from accidental causes or from normal use. There is also a concern to reduce energy use in agriculture, since many farm chemicals have energy intensive manufacturing processes that rely heavily on the use of fossil fuels. Some farmers view organic farming as part of the solution. Organic farmers generally find their new methods and farming operations to be profitable and rewarding.

**"Certified Organic"**

Certified organic is a registered trademark of the Organic Crop Improvement Association (Ontario) known as OCIA. A number of associations in Canada have standards and inspect farms to validate that certified organic farms meet their association standards. These standards have minor differences from one association to another and most are based on the standards as set by the Organic Food Producers Association of North America (OFPANA), and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). Products from certified organic farms are frequently labelled and promoted as certified organic produce.

**Figure 2.** This is the Certified Organic logo of OCIA, other certifying agencies may have other logos.

In the USA, the Organic Foods Act of 1990 established a minimum standard for the certification of organic food. In Canada, there are currently negotiations to establish similar standards for a Canada Organic designation.

**Is it Economically Feasible?**

Farming is never easy. In organic farming, farmers choose not to use some of the convenient chemical tools that are available to other farmers. Management, therefore, becomes even more critical to the success of the farm.

Cereal and forage management systems tend to adapt to organic systems quite readily due to relatively low pest pressures and nutrient requirements. Soybeans also adapt quite well but weeds can be a greater challenge. Corn is frequently not grown on organic farms because of the challenges of weed control and fertility, especially nitrogen requirements, but it can be successfully grown after a forage legume or if manure has been applied. Yields on these crops can be variable, depending on the success of the manager. During transition, yields can be as low as 50% of before, but after a 3 to 5 year transition period, yields usually climb back to 80 to 100% of previous levels.

In fruit and vegetable crops, the challenges are greater and vary from crop to crop. Some crops and managers have been very successful, while other managers with the same crop have had problems. Some insect or disease pests are more serious in some areas of the province than in others. A few pest problems have very few organic solutions. Marketable yields of organic horticultural crops will be below non-organic yields; some of these crops are slightly below and others are significantly lower. Many organic producers have also had successes doing some on-farm processing to add value to the product. An example is to make jams, jellies, juice or pies.

Livestock products can also be produced organically. Antibiotics, growth hormones and insecticides are prohibited. If an animal is sick and antibiotics are absolutely necessary for the animal, antibiotics will be administered and the animal will be segregated from the organic livestock herd and sold from the herd as non-organic stock. Vaccinations and deworming products are generally frowned upon by organic farmers. Some standards allow some of these products, but some organic associations prohibit them. You should always check with the certifying agency to see if the product you want to use is allowed. In some provinces, some vaccinations are required by law. Provincial or Federal law always takes priority over association standards.

**Figure 3.** Spelt, a winter cereal is grown on many organic farms for specialty markets.

**Are Price Premiums Available?**

"Certified organic" produce can usually qualify for a higher price than non-organic products. These premiums vary with the crop and depend on whether you are dealing with a processor, wholesaler, retailer or directly with the consumer. There is no set premium level and it can be whatever is negotiated between the buyer and the seller. At the farm gate, premiums frequently vary from 10-30%. Chains stores may charge 50-100% at the retail level, but frequently retail premiums are less.

Higher prices are necessary to offset the higher production costs (per unit of production) of management, labour and lower yields. These differences vary with the commodity. Some field crop producers, particularly cereals and forages, report very little change in yield while in some horticultural crops, such as tree fruits, significant differences in marketable yield have been observed. There are also higher marketing costs as the markets currently have to be sought after, and this frequently requires greater transportation per unit of production. There is, however, a greater demand than supply currently for most organic products of suitable quality. Many larger markets require large quantities of consistent supply.

Livestock feed is also a market for organic grains and forages to supply some of the province's organic livestock producers. Many organic farms operate with mixed crops and livestock enterprises and only receive premiums for a small part (if any) of their overall production.

**What is the Transition Period?**

The first few years of organic production are the hardest. This is called the transition period when both the soil and the manager have to adjust to the new system. Insect and weed populations also adjust to the new system. Due to the unstable nature of the yields and the fact that price premiums are frequently not available because the products do not qualify as "certified organic," cash flow can be a problem. For this reason, farmers are usually encouraged to convert to organic production slowly. Try 10 to 20% the first year, (always pick one of your best fields to start off with) and then expand your organic acreage when you are more comfortable and confident in your new system. It may take over 5 years to become totally organic, but in the long run it is more successful than a more rapid conversion especially if financial restraints are a consideration.

**FARMER ASSOCIATIONS**

**EFAO – Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario,**
c/o Lawrence Andres, R.R. #1, Tiverton, Ontario N0G 2T0
EFAO is largely an educational group of farmers sharing ideas at meetings and in a newsletter. There are also chapters in central and eastern Ontario.

**COG – Canadian Organic Growers' Inc.,**
P.O. Box 6408, Stn. J, Ottawa, Ontario K2A 3Y6
COG has chapters in Ottawa, Toronto, Durham Region, Waterloo-Wellington, London, and Niagara and several others are forming across Ontario and Canada. *Cognition* is their monthly magazine with information for the organic industry.

**OCIA – Organic Crop Improvement Association (Ontario) Inc.,**
c/o Don Blakney, R.R. #4, Alliston, Ontario L0M 1A0
OCIA (ONT) is one of 12 chapters in Canada and over 30 in North America. They certify farms according to OCIA standards.

**BDFG – Society for Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening in Ontario,**
c/o Irene Smedley, R.R. #2, Acton (Halton Hills), Ontario L7J 2L9
The B.D. Society certifies growers according to their standards using the certification mark "Demeter" on their products.

**OCPP – Organic Crop Producers and Processors Inc.,**
c/o Larry Lenhardt, R.R. #1, Lindsay, Ontario K9V 4R1
Certifying producers and processors across Canada.

**OFPANA – Organic Food Production Association of North America,**
P.O. Box 1078, Greenfield, Mass., 01302
OFPANA is a trade association encouraging common standards and goals for the organic food industry.

**REAP – Resource Efficient Agricultural Production Association,**
P.O. Box 125, 21111 Lakeshore Road, Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec H9X 1C0
REAP is a research and education association focusing on both organic and low chemical methods of farming. Much of their Ontario research is located in Oxford and adjacent counties. They produce *Sustainable Farming*, a quarterly magazine.

## OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

**OMAF – Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food**

Offices are located in each county in the Province. Advisors are available to answer questions on most aspects of farming including organic and sustainable agriculture.

**EAP – Ecological Agriculture Project**

Box 191, Macdonald College, 21111 Lakeshore Road, Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec H9X 1C0
This is a resource centre at Macdonald College (McGill University). They offer a number of services including technical information and literature searches.

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